Communities as Criminal Justice Partners

The Community's Role in Community Policing

by Wesley G. Skogan

Discussions about community policing often involve a number of assumptions about the role that the community will play. These assumptions often appear on reflection to have been arrived at too casually. It is usually anticipated that citizens will be eager to step forward to work with police. Discussions of problem solving frequently assume that police and residents will engage in joint as well as coordinated efforts to tackle neighborhood problems. There even is talk about the role that police can play in fostering the development of community organizations and mobilizing the organizations in problem solving and community-building activities.

It is also widely assumed that crime *prevention* is probably more dependent on the community than on the police side of the community policing equation and that in the final analysis, the police play an ancillary role in maintaining social control. In this view, the police can keep their part of the bargain by being more "customer oriented." They will be more effective when citizens' priorities help shape their agenda, and the subsequent buildup of trust will rebound in the form of greater police-citizen cooperation and mutual support.

Challenges in sustaining community involvement

Although the community side of community policing is as critical as any, many cities have experienced difficulty getting neighborhood residents involved. The Vera Institute of Justice found in its NIJ-sponsored study of community policing in eight cities that "all eight...sites experienced extreme difficulty in establishing a solid community infrastructure on which to build their community policing programs."[1] The researchers concluded that, of all the implementation problems these programs faced, "the most perplexing...was the inability of the police departments to organize and maintain active community involvement in their projects."[2] They found that the list of problems in sustaining community involvement in policing was long.

Police-citizen cooperation. Above all, police and citizens may have a history of not getting along with each other. Especially in disadvantaged neighborhoods, there too often is a record of antagonistic relationships between residents and the police, who may be perceived as arrogant, brutal, and uncaring—not as potential partners. Residents may fear that more intensive policing could generate new conflicts be-

tween them, including harassment and indiscriminate searches.

This concern about police behavior was documented in a recent study of community policing in Chicago. It revealed that Hispanics and African Americans were almost three times as likely as whites to think that police serving their neighborhoods were impolite and more than twice as likely to think they treated people unfairly. Among Hispanics, about 35 percent felt police were not concerned about the problems facing people in their neighborhoods; 25 percent of African Americans but only 15 percent of whites also felt this way.

Organizational involvement. Organizations representing the interests of community members also may not have a track record of cooperating with police. Low-income and high-crime areas often lack the organizational infrastructure needed to get people involved. Since their constituents often fear the police, groups representing low-income and minority areas may be more interested in monitoring police misconduct and pressing for greater police accountability to civilians, not in getting involved with them.

Research that has examined participation in crime prevention programs has revealed that in disadvantaged

neighborhoods it is not easily initiated or sustained. Crime and fear stimulate withdrawal from, not involvement in, community life. In crime-ridden neighborhoods, mutual distrust and hostility often are rampant; residents may view each other with suspicion rather than neighborliness, and this undermines their capacity to forge collective responses to local problems. Because they fear retaliation by drug dealers and neighborhood toughs, programs requiring public meetings or organized cooperation may be less successful in areas with high levels of fear.

Understanding community policing. It is also difficult to get out the community policing message. Nothing in the past has really prepared many Americans for this new police mission. Residents are unlikely to understand community policing's goals and tactics. Vera Institute researchers found in their eight-city study that none of the cities had recognized the need to train residents in their appropriate roles. They concluded, "[A]ny potential for the success of community policing will be limited if major commitments to community education and training are not forthcoming."[3]

There also may be no reason for residents of crime-ridden neighborhoods to think anything about community policing except, "here today, gone tomorrow." Too often their past is strewn with broken promises

and programs that flowered but then wilted when funding dried up or newspapers looked the other way. They are rightly skeptical that it will be any different this time, especially when they discern that the police officers they deal with are not fully committed to the program.

Victims' experiences. Research indicates that people with direct, personal experience with crime are much more dissatisfied with police service (when other factors are held equal). The experience that crime victims often have with the criminal justice system has been referred to as "the second wound." During the 1970s there was a great deal of interest in providing better police service to victims, and in many places victims of domestic violence and sexual assault continue to receive specialized treatment. Few community policing programs, however, seem to feature services for victims.

Community diversity. Some of these problems multiply when program boundaries imposed by police departments bundle together diverse communities. Suspicion and fear may divide the area along race, class, and lifestyle lines, leaving residents and the organizations that represent them at odds with one another. They will probably point fingers at each other over who causes what problems, and the police are likely to be pressured to choose sides. Groups contending over access to housing, municipal services,

infrastructure maintenance, and public-sector jobs and contracts also may find themselves battling one another over policing priorities and for the ear of the district commander.

Community policing then threatens to become politicized. In an evaluation of community policing in Houston, researchers found that the program favored the interests of racially dominant groups and the established interests in the community. This was reflected in turn in the impact of the program, whose positive effects were confined to whites and homeowners.[4]
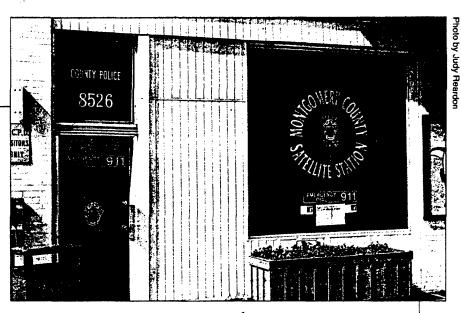
The Houston experience illustrates that policing by consent is difficult in places where the community is fragmented by race, class, and lifestyle. If, instead of trying to find common interests in diverse areas, the police deal mainly with elements of their own choosing, they will appear to be taking sides. It is easy for them to focus community policing on supporting those with whom they get along best and share a similar outlook. As a result, the "local priorities" they represent will be those of some in the community but not all. Critics of community policing are concerned that it can extend the familiarity of police with citizens past the point where police professionalism and commitment to the rule of law control their behavior. To act fairly and constitutionally and to protect minority rights, the police

must sometimes act contrary to majority opinion. As one criminologist notes, community policing must develop a process by which officers can be given sufficient autonomy to do good without increasing the likelihood of their doing evil.[5]

Can it work?

Can community policing live up to the expectations of its supporters? Can the public get involved and see clear benefits from the program? The answers to these questions are not clear, for few systematic evaluations of community policing have examined the role of citizen participation in any detail. Most of my observations are drawn from an ongoing evaluation of a community policing program in Chicago.

The support of the public must be won, not assumed. Police need to be responsive to citizens' concerns, and they have to be able to deliver on community policing's commitment to neighborhood problem solving. Responsiveness requires organizational design: There have to be regular and widely recognized channels by which the public can articulate its concerns and priorities, and there has to be assurance that someone who is responsible for responding at the police end is listening carefully. In Chicago the mechanism is beat meetings. These small gatherings are held all over the

Ministations help police to be more "customer oriented."

city on a regular schedule; they bring together residents and the officers who work in their area to discuss community problems.

The capacity of the police to deliver on commitments they make to deal with those problems has been greatly enhanced by the city's effective integration of community policing with the efforts of other city service agencies. Beat teams are able to command quick attention to problems they identify as priorities. People will come back to meet with police again if they see that concrete things happen as a result of their attendance.

Train citizens, not just police. The public needs to know what they can expect from the police and what they themselves can contribute to coordinated neighborhood problem-solving efforts. They have been trained in the past to call 911

quickly when a crime occurs, but now the range of issues the police may get involved in and the repertoire of responses they can bring to bear has greatly increased. These are sophisticated concepts, and community policing may require some aggressive marketing so that citizens will understand their new powers as consumers of the wide range of products now being offered by customer-oriented agencies. The public also has to understand that theirs is not just a passive role and that "police-community partnerships" are a two-way street. When they discuss possible solutions to neighborhood problems, police are going to ask what resources and personal commitments residents can bring to the table.

Once they are trained, residents are in a much better position to make informed judgments about their priorities, be they programs for

victims or more aggressive action against abandoned cars. Untrained citizens are likely to define their expectations of police in traditional terms and expect more patrols and arrests to solve their problems for them. Trained residents are more likely to understand how they can confront the parents of troublemaking youths, picket irresponsible landlords, boycott merchants who refuse to clean up their alleys, and use their clout to extract resources from the city for neighborhood problem-solving efforts—all things that the police *cannot* do.

Get organizations involved. One of the conclusions of the Chicago evaluation is that it is difficult to sustain autonomous citizen action, even with the support of the police. Community policing needs community organizations. Organizations develop agendas that keep their energies focused even when key leaders tire or turn to other affairs. They provide a locus for identification and commitment, and they provide important social benefits for participants. This commitment and solidarity can in turn sustain the membership during tough moments or in the face of extraordinary demands on their time. Organizations are needed to turn people out for

meetings even when the weather is bad. They also lend supporters of community policing the political capacity they may need if the program flounders, threatens to get off track, or needs protection from its opponents.

Public forums and organizations are also good places to confront diversity issues. We have observed organizations working in support of community policing struggle to build their political base in parts of their district that they previously had ignored. We have seen citizens rise in beat meetings to ask where minority residents of their beat were and how more could be encouraged to attend the gatherings. District-level advisory committees that represent all major factions have brought together leaders of warring groups in a forum that encouraged them to identify concrete problems and solutions acceptable to all. Sometimes this took a year because the political interests they represented were real and truly conflicting ones. Community policing programs, however, are not immune from the forces that often impede the development of effective collective responses to community problems.

Notes

1. Grinc, Randolph M., "'Angels in Marble': Problems in Stimulating Community Involvement in Community Policing," *Crime and Delinquency*, 40, 3 (July 1994):442. See also Sadd, Susan, and Randolph Grinc, *Implementation Challenges in Community Policing: Innovative Neighborhood-Oriented Policing in Eight Cities*, Research in Brief, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, December 1995.

2. Grinc, "'Angels in Marble'": 437.

3. Ibid.:455.

4. Skogan, Wesley G., *Disorder and Decline: Crime and the Spiral of Decay in American Cities*, New York: The Free Press, 1990.

5. Mastrofski, Steven, "Community Policing as Reform: a Cautionary Tale," in *Community Policing: Rhetoric or Reality?*, eds. Jack Greene and Steven Mastrofski, New York: Praeger, 1988:47–67.

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